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The Non-Violent Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. in the 21st Century: Implications for the Pursuit of Social Justice in a Global Context

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ABSTRACT: This essay is an intellectual conversation about the non-violent philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., and the possibility of using it to pursue social justice within the field of social work. The essay asks: In what ways can Gandhi and King's non-violent philosophy help professional social workers capture their inner feelings and thoughts that harbour resistance against social injustice, while, at the same time, seek love, common humanity, compassion and kindness? In what ways can Gandhi and King's ideas about non-violence and their effects on the human psyche help today's social workers to pursue social justice in the global context? What are the real consequences of situating Gandhi and King's non-violent praxis in the pursuit of global social justice? To answer this question, this essay relies on data collected during the author's doctoral research in which he conducted open-ended semi-structured interviews of 20 purposively selected school activists in Toronto in 2009 and 2010. Six of the 20 participants were key informants for the study. This paper is about some of the responses of key informants about the non-violent philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. and how it can be used to pursue social justice. This paper calls for a revolutionized reflection of Gandhi and King's non-violent philosophy. By that, this essay suggests bringing a discursive sophistication into their speeches and writings in ways that can inform and shape contemporary activism while acknowledging their shortcomings and limitations. Furthermore, this essay argues that, given the current charge against the social work profession that it is doing little to address social marginalization and injustices in society, a dedication to the non-violent philosophy of Gandhi and King can be a starting point to position members of the profession as forerunners in the pursuit of global social justice.

This essay makes no intellectual pretenses of possessing extraordinary knowledge about Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., nor does it desire to canonize or deify Gandhi and King. Instead, it seeks to open a conversation about the non-violent philosophy of these men; in particular, how their ideas can inform and shape today's global pursuit of social justice. My interest in this topic has been propelled by my profession as a social work educator. Social justice is one of

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the six core values of the social work profession. According to the Code of Ethics of the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW, 2005), social work practitioners:

> Believe in the obligation of people, individually and collectively, to provide resources, services and opportunities for the overall benefit of humanity and to afford them protection from harm. Social workers promote social fairness and the equitable distribution of resources, and act to reduce barriers and expand choice for all persons, with special regard for those who are marginalized, disadvantaged, vulnerable, and/or have exceptional needs. Social workers oppose prejudice and discrimination against any person or group of persons, on any grounds, and specifically challenge views and actions that stereotype particular persons or groups. (p. 5)

In view of that, the Code of Ethics (CASW, 2005) expects social work practitioners to "advocate for equal treatment and protection under the law and challenge injustices, especially injustices that affect the vulnerable and disadvantaged" (p. 5).

While the desire to pursue social justice within the field of social work is commendable, the definition of the concept of social justice in the social work profession is caught up in inconsistency, paradox and open contradictions (Banerjee, 2011; Galambos, 2008; Larkin, 2004; Hollingsworth, 2003). Reisch (2002) captures this confusion, noting that "it is difficult for social work educators to teach about social justice and social work professionals to act purposefully towards enhancing social justice when the profession of social work is unclear about its meaning" (cited in Banerjee, 2011, p. 190). Furthermore, there is no agreed common approach to pursue social justice (Hardina, 2000; 2004). As a social work educator who has a responsibility of preparing my students to commit to the ethical responsibility of pursuing social justice, I am in constant search of the most effective approaches to achieve social justice in the field of practice. This essay explores the possibilities and limitations of using Gandhi and King's non-violent philosophy to pursue social justice. So what does social justice mean for this essay?

According to Scanlon (1988), the term "social justice" is used, in contemporary times, to satisfy the utilitarian principle, which says, what constitutes "good" must be separated from what constitutes "right." Whatever is considered good for people is good even if it is not right (Von Mises, 1953; Friedman, 1973; Hayek, 1976). Within the utilitarian context, social justice can be ascertained when institutional arrangements favour the greater number of people, even if it means some people (the minority) are neglected and suffer in the process. The limitation of this approach, as Solas (2008) pointed out, is that:

> It does not matter, except indirectly, how the sum of satisfactions (i.e. the greatest good or happiness) is distributed among individuals over time. The aim is simply to maximize the allocation of the means of satisfaction, that is, rights and duties, opportunities and privileges, and various forms of wealth. However, when the principle of utility is satisfied there is no assurance that everyone benefits. (p. 815)

In the environment of utilitarianism, equity and fairness are illusive. The central question is whether society can afford depriving others in the name of satisfying the greater good: should we accept the poverty of others in the face of abundant riches? Nussbaum (2006) contends that "utilitarianism's commitment to aggregation creates problems for thinking well about marginalized or deprived people, for whom some of the opportunities that utilitarianism puts at risk may have an

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especially urgent importance" (p. 73). Given the challenges utilitarianism poses, what definition of "social justice" would better aid social work practice?

According to Barker (1999), social justice is "an ideal condition in which all members of a society have the same basic rights, protections, opportunities, obligations and social benefits" (p. 451). While this definition is an improvement over utilitarianists' talk about social justice, it works towards "equality of treatments" rather than "equality of outcomes." The problem here is that equality of treatment cannot reap social justice because not everybody comes from the same historical and social background; thus, to treat everybody the same is to entrench the existing inequities. John Rawls, one of the most quoted voices in the field of social work on matters of social justice, uses the phrase "undeserved inequalities" (see Rawls, 1971) when discussing the plight of people who have been disadvantaged by social conditions such as poverty, racism, sexism, ableism and homophobia through no fault of their own. In other words, people who experience "undeserved inequalities" are discriminated against for no other reasons than their race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, ethnicity, language, age and religion. Therefore, those that live with "undeserved inequalities" deserve compensation by being given more attention and additional resources, if necessary, to make up for their limitations. Rawls' approach to social justice informs his critiques of libertarian and utilitarian strategies to address social justice that privilege the interest of the majority over that of the minority. As Van Soest (1995) rightly notes, Rawls' egalitarian principles of justice "make redistribution of resources a moral obligation" (p. 1811).

In this essay, social justice is conceptualized in line with Rawls' approach to "social justice" to mean:

> The exercise of altering those arrangements (institutional and organizational power arrangements) by actually engaging in reclaiming, appropriating, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights of equity, equality, and fairness in social, economic, educational, and personal dimensions, among other forms of relationships. (Goldfarb & Grinberg, 2002, p. 162)

The discussion that follows provides some conceptual readings of Gandhi and King's non-violent philosophy.

Conceptualizing Gandhi and King's Non-Violent Philosophy: A Review of Related Literature

Non-violence is practised in almost all major faiths and religions: Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism, Jainism and Buddhism. In fact, for some of these faiths, non-violence is not just a matter of choice; it is an undeniable and irrevocable way of life to which followers must strictly adhere. History abounds with examples of non-violent acts. Whether one is looking at the Plebeian protests against Rome in the fifth century B.C., the resistance of the Netherlands to Spanish rule in mid-sixteenth century Europe, or the American colonists' refusal to pay taxes and debts to the British, non-violent resistance has been used in many places and by several groups to attain a certain amount of change in society. Thus, it is fair to say that non-violent philosophy was already known and practised long before Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. adopted it as a tool for social change.

In spite of this seemingly popular use of non-violent resistance in human history, it is ironic that we have yet to find a community or a society that has a single word for "non-violence" (Kurlansky, 2006; Holmes & Gan, 2005). In fact, the closest word humans have had for "non-violence" is in the Sanskrit tradition: *ahimsa*. *Ahimsa* has its root in another Sanskrit word, *himsa*,

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which means "harm." The negation of *himsa* is *ahimsa*. Thus, *ahimsa* means "not harm," just as non-violence is interpreted as "not doing harm." However, if non-violence is "not doing harm," then what is it doing? Does non-violence mean the same thing as "not violence?" The absence of a word for "non-violence," unlike "violence," makes the definition of the term confusing and is responsible for the misreading and many misinterpretations of "non-violence" within public discourses.

Gene Sharp, one of the foremost scholars of non-violence, argues that there are several meanings associated with non-violent action (1959). Sharp (1959) outlines non-violence into nine different forms. These include *non-resistance, active reconciliation, moral resistance, selective non-violence, passive resistance, peaceful resistance, non-violent direct action, non-violent revolution,* and *satyagraha* (pp. 46-59). *Non-resistance* is practised by people who do not want to get involved in anything in society. Such individuals are non-violent, not on the basis of ideology or politics, but on the simple basis of apathy. *Active reconciliation* is a method of activism that only tries to convince people without using coercive non-violent techniques. For *moral resistance* activists, evil should always be resisted through peaceful and moral means. *Selective non-violent* advocates are not always non-violent; as their name implies, they decide on which issues they may want to be non-violent. For instance, *selective non-violent* activists may refuse to participate in specific violent conflicts, such as international war. This does not mean that they are against violence in general. Indeed, the fact that somebody is an anti-war protester does not necessarily mean that they are non-violent in general. *Passive resistance* activists may be closer to selective non-violent activists; however, *passive resistance* activists are non-violent, not for reasons of principle, but because they lack the means to use violence, or they know they would lose in a violent confrontation. *Peaceful resistance* activists are within the category of passive resistance, except that peaceful resisters recognize the moral superiority of non-violent struggles. *Non-violent direct action* activists are those who use methods such as civil disobedience and non-cooperation to establish new patterns and institutional changes. Closely related to *non-violent direct action* activists are *non-violent revolutionists*, who change society completely through non-violent means without the use of the state apparatus. The last category of non-violent activists is made up of the *satyagrahis*. They are individuals who attain truth with their opponents through love and non-violent actions. While Sharp's typology of non-violence is useful, it does not tell us exactly what constitutes non-violence.

Similar to Sharp, Bond (1988) categorizes non-violence into three types: *absolute pacifist*, *principled pacifist*, and *pragmatic pacifist* (pp. 86-87). The *absolute pacifists* endure suffering even when it leads to death; unfortunately, they do not work to reduce the suffering of others. The *principled pacifists,* despite possessing the objective of working to mitigate violence to the best of their ability, do not know with certainty which path is least violent in the long term. *Pragmatic pacifists* are concerned with using non-violence in pursuit of a specific socio-political objective wherein the non-violent ethic is specially utilized as a means to other ends. The relevance of Bond's conception of non-violence is that he links a sense of community with the sanctity of all life. In this sense, non-violent advocates refrain from violent behaviour because they believe that "sacrifice without a sense of community or unity between conflicting groups is nothing but violence for other ends" (Bond, 1988, p.87). Unfortunately, Bond's typology, like that of Sharp, does not give us adequate understanding of what constitutes non-violence.

Given the contradictions and confusions around the concept "non-violence," Gandhi borrowed two Gujarati words — *satya* ("Truth") and *agraha* ("taking, firmness, seizing, or holding) — to explain his understanding of non-violence. *Satyagraha* (*satya*+*agraha*) means to hold on to the "Truth" in a firm manner. It also means "love-force" or "soul-force." Gandhi argues that "Truth" is God. Thus, *satyagraha* means the way of life of one who holds steadfastly to God and dedicates her

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or his life to the service of God (Gandhi, 1961, p.iii). Gandhi argues that Truth is the most important name of God, and wherever there is Truth (note the capitalization of the "T") there is also knowledge that is true. Where there is no Truth, there cannot be true knowledge, and where there is "true knowledge," there is always "bliss" (*Ananda*) (Gandhi, 1961, p. 38). Since it is impossible for humans to discern the ultimate, absolute Truth — something only God can achieve — the seeker of Truth must be governed and guided by *ahimsa* (Gandhi, 1961, p.41).

Ahimsa, in the Sanskrit language, literally means non-harm or more fully, loving one's opponent to the point of not wishing her or him any harm. Within the moral structure of Gandhi, there are two basic pillars: Truth and *ahimsa* (that is, non-violence or, as Gandhi calls it, love). Truth is the end; non-violence is the means. But the end and the means are irrevocably bound to each other. However, if at any time one is not sure which one to use, non-violence should reign supreme.

Gandhi's idea of non-violence is repeated several times in the works and words of Martin Luther King (King, 1958; 1959; 1963; 1966). Unlike Gandhi, who engages in complex religious philosophical readings and analysis of non-violence, King treats non-violence as a practical moral principle: do unto others as you would have others to do unto you. King developed five notions that illustrate his philosophical commitment to non-violence. First, non-violence is not for cowards; it takes great courage to place oneself unarmed and defenseless in front of an opponent who is willing to use physical violence (King, 1958, p. 102). Second, non-violence is not about harming, defeating or humiliating one's opponents; its goal is to win the friendship and understanding of one's opponents (King, 1958, p. 102). Third, non-violent resistance is aimed at evil deeds and not at the evil doer. Although a person's good deed may require approbation and bad deeds disapprobation, the doer of the deed, whether good or bad, deserves respect (King, 1958, p. 102; also see Gandhi, 1957, p. 276). For King (1958), non-violence is not a struggle against bodies but against systems of oppression (p. 103); therefore, the sooner the struggle against systems and institutions of oppression is begun, the more it benefits the struggle. Fourth, although non-violence is physically non-aggressive, it is spiritually aggressive. The strength of non-violence lies within. This is why it has the power to reach deep into the opponent's soul (King, 1958, p. 104). Fifth, non-violence is situated on self-suffering. King expresses the value of self-suffering in the oft-repeated phrase "unearned suffering is redemptive" (Groves, 2000, p. 208). For King, self-suffering is a virtue made out of necessity — an act that is needed to redeem the oppressed groups from bitterness and hatred that may cause them to seek vengeance and retaliation. Although King understood self-suffering through his Christian perspective — often linking the redemption of the oppressed to Christ's suffering on the cross — he did not treat self-suffering as a theological commandment. Instead, he treated it as a process of self-discovery and healing from bitterness (King, 1963, p. 154).

Given the stance of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King on non-violence, the essay asks these questions: In what ways can the ideas of Gandhi and King's non-violence and their effects on the human psyche help today's social workers to pursue social justice in the global context? What are the real consequences of situating Gandhi and King's non-violent praxis in the pursuit of global social justice? How does Gandhi and King's non-violent philosophy help social workers capture their inner feelings and thoughts that harbour resistance to social injustice, while, at the same time, seeking understanding, empathy, non-judgment and compassion?

To answer these questions, this essay relies on the comments, responses and criticism of six key informants who participated in my doctoral research about the non-violent philosophy of Gandhi and King and its implications for contemporary education. The discussion that follows details the methods of this study.

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Methodology

The data in this essay was taken from qualitative digitally-recorded semi-structured interviews in which 20 purposively-selected school activists from universities in Toronto, Canada, participated. As I have already noted, the data form part of my doctoral research, in which I examined the non-violent philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King and its implications for transformative education. The data in this essay is taken specifically from the interviews granted by six key informants in the research. The key informants, unlike the other research participants, were not selected based on any demographic requirement, but rather on their in-depth knowledge of the works of Gandhi and King, as well as their experiences in the field of university school activism. My years of involvement in student politics at the University of Toronto, as well as with community activism, made it easier to identify and locate these key informants. They were my key informants because, on a personal level, I admire their sense of commitment to social justice and have also worked with them on several fronts to fight against social injustice in different contexts.The key informants were sources of verification and cross-checking of information for the research. Further, the key informants contributed in framing and shaping the interview questions. After the initial interviews with the key informants, certain gaps were noted in the interview questions. This helped me to review and adjust the interview questions to suit the research needs. They also helped me to identify a pool of activists, some of whom became part of the research project.

Data involving key informants was gathered in Toronto in 2009 and 2010. The goal of the interview was to critically examine the non-violent philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King and its ability to inform and shape transformative activism in the global context. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was conducted at places of the participants' choosing. With the consent of my key informants, each interview was digitally recorded. Recording the interviews allowed participants to speak more naturally and it also helped me accurately record the interview proceedings while taking notes. Follow-up questions were asked, where necessary, to seek clarification and, sometimes, more information. The notes I took became relevant and useful when I was analyzing and interpreting the data. The following questions guided the interviews: What do you know about Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King's non-violent philosophy? Do you see any relevancy in their non-violent philosophy in today's pursuit of social justice? What do you see as challenges in implementing their non-violent philosophy in today's global context?

Data Analysis and Limitations

Strategies for data organization and reduction, as suggested by Denzin and Lincoln (1994), were used. The data were transcribed verbatim and transcripts were checked with recorded data to ensure correctness. To avoid bias or one-sided interpretation, the transcripts were analyzed and compared constantly with interview notes as well as with other participants' responses. Transcripts from each individual interview were compared line by line to identify similar concepts that may indicate a response pattern. An initial list of concepts and words was created based on observation of data in the individual interviews; other themes were added as the data were further explored in accordance with Glesne's suggestion that putting related quotes into a common file is a progressive exercise that continues throughout the data analysis (1999).

With themes for the data formed, the task of analyzing and interpreting responses of participants to reflect what took place in the interview became paramount. Responses of participants were cross-referenced with interview notes and existing literature to tease out points of

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convergence and divergence as well as sources of tension and pedagogic relevance. In order to address all ethical concerns, participants were given pseudonyms in data reporting. In addition, each quote and statement of the participants was edited to remove pause words (such as "like," "uh" and "um") and, where necessary, grammatical errors were corrected to make it read fluently. However, in editing the quotes, care was taken not to tamper with the substance of what was said.

The research was limited by insufficient funds and a strict timeline to complete the thesis. Consequently, participants in this research were mainly recruited from Toronto, where most of the school and community activists I know live. The sample, therefore, did not include the voices and knowledge of other activists living and working outside my networks in Toronto and other provinces. Given this limitation, readers should treat the findings in this essay as one way of pursuing social justice, but not the only way. Further, the ideas in this essay are a working framework that needs further modification in any given social, historical and geopolitical contexts. The discussion that follows talks about some of the findings of this study.

Study Findings

In this section, I present some of the narrative accounts of key informants as they speak of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King's non-violent philosophy and its significance and limitations in the pursuit of social justice in a global context:

Misconception of King and Gandhi's Non-violent Philosophy

For many people, Gandhi and King's non-violent philosophy lacks a cutting-edge tool to dismantle dominant ideologies. It softens issues, and is often used by those who are not serious about creating institutional changes (Jensen, 2006; X, 1964). Speaking in defence of Gandhi and King's non-violent philosophy, my key informants insisted that Gandhi and King have been misrepresented by contemporary educators. James, a final-year doctoral candidate who has been an activist for the past 15 years, spoke about his initial skepticism of Gandhi and King's non-violent philosophy to create social transformation because of the way it has been misrepresented by the ruling class:

> When I was young, of course, I dismiss him [Martin Luther King Jr.] as a sellout. But when I engage with King's ideas, not what the ruling class define King about a few lines about "I Have a Dream" speech and that is what they use to define King. And I said, "Oh holy sh*t, King was a bad ass." And I am thinking a lot of people are running their mouth about King saying he is a sellout, but because they have not read the works of King. (James, interview, October 29, 2009)

Indeed, James is not alone in the way he initially dismissed Gandhi and King. Mina, a part-time graduate student and an activist for 20 years, also noted that some people wrongfully assume that King is a "soft" activist; however, a critical look at his non-violent philosophy and politics demonstrate that he is very radical:

> It is interesting that Martin Luther King is hailed as the prince of peace and the king of non-violence, but when you listen to him, he is very aggressive in his argument, particularly when he is talking about violence that is perpetuated against the poor; he is very clear of the fact that people have to resort to certain action that could be construed as violence if they have not

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> been given the alternative to choose from. (Mina, interview, November 11, 2009)

Both James and Mina are of the opinion that there has been some general misreading of the works of Gandhi and King in contemporary times. For them, the ruling class has "white-washed" Gandhi and King to be nonaggressive individuals, when, in their time, they were seen as very radical. For instance, there was a time in the United States where as much as 72 per cent of whites and 55 per cent of blacks disapproved of King, especially based on what they saw as his radical position on the Vietnam War (West, 2011). King was even accused by the Federal Bureau Investigation of being on the payroll of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to promote the communist agenda (Aberbathy, 1989; Dyson, 2000). Similarly, in 1931, Winston Churchill described Gandhi as a "seditious Middle Temple lawyer, now posing as a fakir … striding half-naked up the steps of the Viceroyal palace" (Churchill, 1931, pp. 94-95). Today, none of these appear in public discussions about Gandhi and King. Rather, what we hear about King is his "I Have a Dream" speech, and for Gandhi, his beautiful quotes, such as "Be the change you want to see" (Younge, 2013; Freudenheim, 2013; Weebly.com, 2010; New York Times, 2008). With this kind of selective memory of Gandhi and King, it is no wonder many radical activists have paid less attention to their ideas.

To be fair, in some way, this misrepresentation benefitted Gandhi and King. Today, some celebrate and eulogize them as the best things to happen in history. Stuart Nelson (1975) once wrote that nowhere in human history and time, perhaps over the past thousand years, has humanity known one with a greater compassion for her or his fellow human beings than Gandhi (p. 58). Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel also prophesied that "the whole future of America depends on the impact and influence of Dr. King" (West, 2011, para. 3). In fact, in the opening introduction to the book *Gandhi and King: The Power of Nonviolent Resistance*, Michael J. Nojeim was even more audacious in his description of Gandhi and King:

> When the history of the 20th century is written, it shall record that Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. were at the forefront of that century's most important struggles: the struggle for freedom, the fight for equality, and the battle against violence. (Nojeim, 2004, p. xi)

These accolades of Gandhi and King have come at the expense of other great leaders such as Malcolm X and the Black Panther leaders in the United States, as well as Subhas Chandra Bose in India, whose respective contributions to the civil rights movement in the United States and the fight for India's independence from British colonial rule have received less attention and recognition.

Mina thinks differently about this "saintly" misrepresentation of Gandhi and King's non-violent philosophy. For her, it is done intentionally to encourage non-violent activists to shun any radical and "aggressive" method in the pursuit of social justice. In effect, certain privileges and powers attained through the oppression of others go uncontested. This is how she spoke succinctly about it:

> I have heard from the traditional definition of non-violence as when you consciously choose not to take up a weapon to inflict violence on another body. Non-violence is also that which does not disrupt. Non-violence is what allowed the status quo to continue the way it does. Everything we do is essentially non-violence and has resulted in being deny the right to live. … They perpetuate violence against us through their practices of gate-keeping and segregation and when we fight against them or even think against it, we get label as intolerance and anti-establishment, yet we just instinctually doing

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> what naturally is within us based on the conditions and environment and of things being done to us. (Mina, interview, November 11, 2009)

While Gandhi and King might have benefitted from this "saintly" misrepresentation, it has also caused other radical activists to treat their ideas as passé. Derrick Jensen, the radical environmental activist, has insisted that Gandhi and King's non-violent philosophy "is one of the worst things you can say to anyone in an abusive situation, and one of the things abusers most want to hear" (Jensen, 2006, p. 688). This sentiment of Derrick Jensen is echoed by Malcolm X. For Malcolm X, it is indeed a criminal act to teach people not to defend themselves when they are the constant victims of oppression (X, 1964). Given the confusion and misrepresentation of the non-violent philosophy of Gandhi and King, my key informants suggested that a revolutionized reframing of Gandhi and King's non-violent philosophy may be necessary to make it useful in the contemporary pursuit of social justice.

Towards a Revolutionized Reframing of Gandhi and King's Non-violent Philosophy

For a revolutionized reframing, my key informants imply, Gandhi and King must first be repositioned as men who stood and died for the struggle to weed out the world of its social injustices, oppression and inequities. In the opinion of Asti, an undergraduate student leader who has been involved in activism for seven years, a part of a revolutionized reframing of Gandhi and King required wrestling their personalities from this "saintly" depiction to radical revolutionists who were fearless in their fight for justice:

> I think writers like bell hooks and Tyson have used the works of Martin Luther King to articulate contemporary issues in education because they see his relevance to education. For example, in talking about how America needs revolutionary values, that is totally bell hooks. I think those kinds of a revolutionized reframing of King in context of his works make the resurgence of his works and history worthy of study because they position him differently from the Martin King we are used to reading because the new ways of framing Martin Luther King positioned him as somebody who is not afraid of violence when it comes to challenging injustices in our society. (Asti, interview, October 3, 2010)

This thought of repackaging King and Gandhi as courageous and fearless in their pursuit of social justice was echoed by Mohammed, an undergraduate activist who has been involved in anti-homophobia activism for the last seven years:

> Violence was perpetuated against them [Gandhi and King] constantly and in fact we know it was violence that ended their lives, yet they were not afraid of violence and in fact they knew that, count what may, this is a possibility because they knew that given the works they do it is a possibility. This is how Gandhi and King should be remembered. (Mohammed, interview, October 29, 2009)

This essay adds that the revolutionizing of Gandhi and King should not be limited to their personalities, but should also include their ideas. Thus, rather than reading Gandhi and King's non-violent philosophy as a literal text, it must be read in a general sense of how their ideas can broaden the debate about how to pursue social justice. A revolutionized reframing of their non-violent

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philosophy will require bringing a discursive sophistication into what they said in ways that can inform and shape contemporary activism, while acknowledging their shortcomings and limitations. With these thoughts in mind, I asked my key informants to reconceptualize Gandhi and King's non-violent philosophy in a way that pushes their thoughts forward. This is how my key informants responded:

It is "Non-violent Philosophy" and not "Not-violent Philosophy"

For my key informants, a revolutionized rereading of Gandhi and King's non-violent philosophy must start off by separating their "non-violence" from the general meaning of "not violence." While "not violence" implies non-engagement or refusing to fight back, "non-violence" as used in Gandhi and King's philosophy implies taking actions that will stop injustice and oppression. Oftentimes, these two words have been used interchangeably (Nagler, 1986; 2004). Several explanations could be offered for this confusion: first, there are some non-violent groups such as "absolute pacifists" and "non-resisters" who refuse to take any action that involves confrontation (Sharp, 1959; Bond, 1988). Ironically, most of the absolute pacifists and non-resisters tailor their messages after the non-violent philosophy of Gandhi and King and even choose these men as their role models (Sharp, 1959; Bond, 1988). Second, "non-violence," as used in Gandhi's philosophy, was, again, originally borrowed from the Sankrit word *himsa*, which means "to harm." When "a" is added to *himsa*, it becomes *ahimsa*. To the uninformed mind, *ahimsa* is the opposite of *himsa*, and must therefore be read as "not to harm" (not violence); however, from Gandhi's philosophical stance, *ahimsa* means something deeper than "not to harm." Within this context, Mina argued that Gandhi and King's non-violent philosophy can be meaningful to the contemporary pursuit of social justice if the "non-violence" is read as an action-oriented strategy and not as "non-engagement":

> I think that the mainstream has successfully created a myth that [non-violence] is not violence and those who wish and do wish to use it cannot fight back. … We are subjected to intellectual, emotional, spiritual violence every day; we have to devise means of fighting back those violence. But we have to be more strategic and creative in the ways we fight back and I think non-violence, as defined outside the mainstream, can be used. (Mina, interview, November 11, 2009)

Mina's position was supported by Emmanuel, a South Asian activist who is actively involved in the fight for the rights of migrant farmers in rural communities in Ontario. According to Emmanuel, "non-violence" in Gandhi and King's philosophy should not be read as the absence of tension, disturbances and disharmony, but the presence of justice: "I don't look at non-violence and violence as two sides of a separate coin. I think both are put in the same framework. … Non-violence is not the absence of tension, there is always tension in non-violence" (Emmanuel, interview, November 16, 2009).

Emmanuel, like Mina, recognizes that non-violence is not the same as "not violent." While the latter may be the absence of tension, misunderstanding and conflict, the former does not exclude tension, misunderstanding and conflict. In fact, the benchmark for measuring non-violence is the presence of justice, equity and fairness. Non-violence is a social instrument in the struggle for justice and freedom. The major initiators of non-violence have always been inspired by the desire to free humanity from social injustice (Vettickal, 1993, p. 64). It is this passion for freedom and justice that may have driven Mahatma Gandhi to challenge racial segregation in South Africa after he was pushed out of a first-class compartment of a train by a white official at the railway station in

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Pietermaritzburg, then the capital of the Colony of Natal, in 1893. As Gandhi later explained on the incident:

> I began to think of my duty. Should I fight for my rights to go back to India, or should I go to Pretoria without minding the insults? It would be cowardice to run back to India without fulfilling my obligation. The hardship I was subjected to was superficial — only a symptom of the deep disease of colour prejudice. I should try, if possible, to root out the disease and suffer hardships in the process. (Gandhi, 1958, p. 282)

The idea of rereading the non-violent philosophy of Gandhi and King as a call for social justice was repeated in the responses of key informants.

Non-violence is the Pursuit of Social Justice

Emmanuel reconceptualized Gandhi and King's non-violent philosophy as action-oriented strategies to dismantle oppressive structures in society.

> I think non-violence is about understanding how power dynamics function to disengage bodies and working to dismantle the power dynamics like white supremacists, racism, patriarchy. It is about dismantling those types of power structures. (Emmanuel, interview, November 16, 2009)

This thought was corroborated by Michael, a White male and disabled university professor who has been involved in activism for the last 20 years. According to Michael, non-violence consists of daily choices activists make to ensure that certain doors are accessible to others who, on their own, cannot enter into such spaces. His comment was in reference to academia and how it can isolate others:

> Non-violence, it seems to me, will have to be some sense of what I do or what any academic does to always make space accessible to many people… It is interesting because I think sometimes there is a cultural conception of the university and its relations to the broader community, and one concept we use quite often here is the thing about the Ivory Tower. We don't often hear the other Tower, but we hear the Ivory Tower and suppose that makes some reference by the colour of Ivory; some Western notion of purity and a tower that cannot be accessed by many people … So I think it is the understanding that it wasn't so much the Ivory Tower as it was a barricade that only kind of scholars that were allowed [*sic*] in the academy. … So I think that was pretty much of my non-violence is to disrupt these barriers for others. (Michael, interview, November 2, 2009)

For Emmanuel and Michael, non-violence is about different things (big or small) that we do daily to challenge oppression and injustice in society. From the responses of my key informants, non-violent activists have been called to challenge and fight social injustice, inequities and unfairness, but what are the terms and conditions under which social injustice ought to be challenged? In the next section, my key informants outlined strategies for fighting social injustice in society.

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Non-violence is about Humanizing Opponents

A majority of my key informants were of the opinion that the non-violent philosophy of Gandhi and King is a great strategy to pursue social justice because it focuses more on the oppression than the oppressor. According to Anya — a university professor who has been involved in activism for more than 10 years — the main goal of Gandhi and King's non-violent philosophy is to challenge systems of oppression and not necessarily those who work within the systems. This was how Anya put it:

> Gandhi and King wanted to think of a reaction to colonization and oppression that will really disturb the colonial relation, but not the colonizer and oppressor. So my understanding is that non-violence comes from a desire not just to seek a result, but also to do it in a way that it does not reproduce violence on others. (Anya, interview, November 2, 2009)

Asti also shared similar idea: "[Gandhi and King] speak to the systemic injustices within the system, but do not hate the individuals" [Asti, interview, November 3, 2010).

For Anya and Asti, Gandhi and King's non-violent philosophy teaches the oppressed bodies to challenge oppression in ways that will not mimic the violent tendencies of the oppressor. Elsewhere, Paulo Freire (2007) insisted that the oppressed bodies, having experienced humiliation, depravity and dehumanization of oppression, would never reproduce the same violence on the oppressors. Instead, they would oppose the oppressors' violence and injustice with love (pp. 44-45). Mohammed agreed with Freire's idea that there is power in refusing to emulate the oppressor:

> Within the education system, I think Gandhi's conception of *ahimsa* will be ideal for the work we do. I remember when I was in high school; the level of violence for me was so dangerous. And the way we organized the gay students group and we have to meet in secrecy because of the level of violence against gay men. Without love for ourselves and even people who hate us, we would not have made the progress we have made within the TDSB … I believe the way forward is fighting back with love for those who hate us. Not only love for those who oppose us but also love for ourselves. (Mohammed, interview, January 5, 2010)

For Mohammed, loving and humanizing one's opponent is one way of refusing to mimic the violent tendencies of the oppressor. But this love, as expressed by Mohammed, must be thought of as something that goes beyond sentimental and affectionate feeling. It is a process of refusing to be like the oppressor. If violence dehumanizes and rots the soul and body of the oppressor (Fanon, 1963; Memmi, 1965), then, to Mohammed, fighting the oppressor with love is one way of saving one's soul from destruction and corruption.

Discussion

A charge against Gandhi and King, from other readers, is that their ideas lack a thesis and consistency (Chakrabarty, 2006, p. 57). Unfortunately, Gandhi and King had not done enough to defend themselves against this charge. In fact, Gandhi once boasted that a*t the time of his writing, he never thought of what he had previously said because his aim was not to be consistent with his previous statements, but to be consistent with the truth (Attenborough, 1982, p. 93). This charge of inconsistency has presented a fundamental challenge for many people who read Gandhi and King's*

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non-violent philosophy in the 21st century. This has contributed to some people misinterpreting and misrepresenting Gandhi and King's ideas when they read their non-violent philosophy as a theoretical thesis (Jensen, 2006; Chakrabarty, 2006). Thus, for my key informants, the best way to read Gandhi and King's non-violent philosophy in the 21st century is to cautiously hold on to a broad theoretical lens that can elucidate, as well as resolve, the number of thorny issues relating to their ideas of violence and non-violence. The trick, in the view of my key informants, is not to read Gandhi and King's non-violent philosophy as a finished product, but as a working document that needs a revolutionized reframing to make it a subversive tool to rally people around the fight against social injustices. In reading Gandhi and King, this means a shift should be made from treating their ideas as a blueprint to a work-in-progress document that requires additional footnotes and endnotes to make it useful in different contexts and situations.

This is exactly what my key informants have done as they engage the non-violent philosophy of Gandhi and King in several ways to make it useful in the contemporary pursuit of social justice. From the responses, this essay synthesized my key informants' thoughts and ideas into two major themes: first, non-violent philosophy is a call for the pursuit of social justice and, second, non-violent philosophy is about humanizing one's opponents. The discussion that follows expands on these themes and discusses how they are relevant to the contemporary pursuit of social justice in a global context.

Non-violence is a Call for the Pursuit of Global Social Justice

From the responses of my key informants, a revolutionized reading of the non-violent philosophy of Gandhi and King is to position it as a passionate call for the pursuit of social justice. This idea could be gleaned from Gandhi's description of the core responsibility of a *satyagrahi*: a person devoted to non-violent philosophy:

> [If a *satyagrahi*], in this world, finds himself [or herself] up against evil, he [or she] cannot [keep quiet] but to resist. He [or she] comes across injustice, cruelty, exploitation, and oppression. These he [or she] has to oppose with all the resources at his [or her] command. In [this] crusade, his [or her] reliance is on Truth or God; and since the greatest truth is the unity of all life, Truth can be attained only by loving services of all, i.e. by non-violence. (Gandhi, 1961, p. iii)

Mahatma Gandhi was not the only person who saw non-violent philosophy as a rallying call to pursue social justice in society. King (1963), in his Letter from Birmingham Jail, said: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" (cited in King, 1992, p. 85). In another page in the same letter, King (1963) further noted, "We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people" (cited in King, 1992, p. 92). These statements, and several others in the letter, justified why silence, apathy and inaction can be dangerous in the face of social injustice against others. Both King and Gandhi call out the followers of non-violent philosophy to do everything within their power to challenge injustice, inequity and oppression in society. From my key informants, these statements and several others in the works of Gandhi and King, suggest that these men were calling on humanity to rise up and fight social injustice and oppression wherever they occurred.

This reading of non-violent philosophy of Gandhi and King can be useful for the field of social work. A senior colleague at Memorial University, Ken Barter (2003), gleaned evidence from different literature to demonstrate that the social work profession is gradually relegating its

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commitments to the second core ethical value of the profession: "the pursuit of social justice" (CASW, 2005, p. 5). Some of Barter's (2003) examples include the works of Parsloe (1990), Riches and Ternowetsky (1990), as well as Rivera and Erlich (1995), which suggest that the profession of social work has taken an ambivalent position when it comes to responding to poverty. Hagen (1992) and Wharf (1993) also talk about the unwillingness among some social workers to work with poor families. Specht (1990) and Specht and Courtney (1994) have similarly accused some practitioners of focusing more on "psychotherapy" and, in the process, have ignored the professional call to pursue social justice. Parsons, Hernandez, and Jorgensen (1988) and Caragata (1997) argue that the over-concentration on specialization within the profession of social work is breeding new practitioners that care less about unified approaches to responding to human needs and social problems. These charges against the profession are emerging in the midst of concerns that the profession has done little to answer accusations of its historical complicity in racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, ableism and colonialism against certain marginalized communities (LeFrancois, Menzies, & Reaume, 2013; Shaikh, 2012; Hair & O'Donoghue, 2009; Mullings, 2007; Jeffrey, 2005; Barter, 2003; Razack & Jeffery, 2003). Just recently, in the fall of 2013, I was having a conversation with my social work students who are doing their field work, and what became apparent in our conversation is that the title "social worker" does not reveal "warm receptions" from marginalized communities anymore. For many marginalized communities, social workers are more of an extended branch of a social control, or rules enforcement regime, than a unit advocating on behalf of oppressed communities and clients. Several reasons have contributed to this negative image: practitioners are sometimes called upon to play the uncomfortable role as the go-between on matters between the state and service users (Fowler, 2008). Unfortunately, in some such cases, reports filed by practitioners have been used by the state to make decisions against service users. There is also the fact that the social work profession comes from a long history of colonialism, classism, homophobia, ableism and racism. These factors, taken cumulatively, have contributed to the negative image of the profession. Of course, social work can produce an equally long list of achievements that demonstrate the great accomplishments of the profession in marginalized communities and for service users. Such an exercise, however, would only produce a Pyrrhic victory. What needs to be done is a demonstration that social work practitioners are still committed to the pursuit of social justice. This feat can be achieved when practitioners in the field of social work position themselves as *satyagrahi* who will fight social injustice anywhere it occurs and whomever it affects. In today's neo-liberal world, where human lives are reduced to mere economic units, your economic value determines if the state will respond to your call in times of crisis (Giroux, 2006). Therefore, social work practitioners have to make the pursuit of social justice their top priority in order to address institutional and systemic violence against marginalized service users.

Non-violence is about Humanizing Opponents

There is no doubt that oppression and injustice in society need to be fought against, but what are the terms and conditions under which they should be challenged? There appears to be two fundamental sides to the debate of pursuing social justice. Representing one side of the debate are Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, and finely representing the other side are Frantz Fanon and Malcolm X.

For Gandhi and King, an absolute non-violent approach to resistance is the way forward in fighting social injustice (Gandhi, 1961; King, 1986). Both men argue that marginalized bodies need to utilize non-violent strategies to fight injustice and oppression because violent resistance leads to bitterness, while non-violent resistance leads to reconciliation and the creation of "a beloved community" (Gandhi, 1961; King, 1958). Fanon and Malcolm X had a theoretical doubt about the effectiveness of non-violent resistance in achieving social transformation. Frantz Fanon, for instance, argues that colonial violence has created a "Manichaean world" between the oppressors and the

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oppressed. Since this colonial world is protected by violence, only through violent revolution can the oppressed free themselves from the Manichean world and cast away any inferiority complex, despair and inactions (Fanon, 1963, p. 94). For Fanon and Malcolm X, violent revolution makes the oppressed fearless and restores their self-respect, which has been lost through the colonialist systems (X, 1970; Fanon, 1963). In an environment of perceived injustices and feelings of "you are on your own," violence, unfortunately, has become a cathartic act for the oppressed. Thus, it is untenable and even suicidal to expect the oppressed to use non-violence to fight systems that wish them harm and destruction.

Without doubt, social injustice should be fought at any cost, and this essay does not critique Fanon and Malcolm X for recommending violent strategies to stop oppression. However, we need to ask whether violence can indeed create healing for the oppressed and set them free from oppression. Ironically, it was the same Frantz Fanon (1963) who catalogued the negative effects of violence on its victims. Thus, given Fanon's own findings, at what point does violence really start healing? Presbey (1996) contends that for the victim of violence, it is hard to say that there is any healing taking place (p. 287). In fact, no retribution for violence is enough to help such victims forget their pain and sufferings, let alone obtain healing. I argue that, rather than healing, violence stubbornly plunges communities into this cycle of revenge and retaliation, as both the oppressed and the oppressor seek opportunities to cause the most harm to each other. History is filled with such examples of how violent resistance has exposed oppressed groups to further insidious violence under the system of domination. According to Arendt (1970), in a real contest of violence, the superiority of the oppressor has always been absolute (p. 240). Those in power are able to marshal the state apparatus to inflict violence that far exceeds the violence of resisters. The recent events in Syria under Bashar Hafez al-Assad's regime are a good example of the detrimental effects of violent resistance. Other examples include the ongoing violence in the Middle East: between Israel on the one hand, and Hamas and Hezbollah on the other; the United States and its allies on one side, and religious fundamentalists (al-Qaeda) on the other. These examples demonstrate the limitations of violent resistance to achieve social transformation. Besides these limitations, this essay is targeting activists in the field of education, social work and other related disciplines, and such groups are usually ill-equipped to use violence as a tool for fighting social injustice. Therefore, this makes non-violent resistance a viable alternative for the pursuit of social justice. If violence dehumanizes the oppressor and the oppressed, then what does it mean to become "human" again? Ironically, Fanon (1963) offers a resolution when he urges the leaders of the colonized worlds not to reproduce Europe or imitate European violent tendencies, but to instead gesture toward the recreation of a new humanity: Europe "today swaying between atomic and spiritual disintegration" (p. 311). For Fanon, Europe has been successful insofar as it has succeeded on anything attempted through violence. Consequently, Europe has lost its sense of humanity. Europe's game has finally ended, and "now lives at such a mad, reckless pace that she has shaken off all guidance and all reason, and she is running headlong into the abyss" (Fanon, 1963, p. 312). This is all the more reason why the oppressed must find something different and do something that Europe has failed to achieve; that is, the recreation of a new humanity that does not seek violence as the only tool to create changes (Fanon, 1963). What can be gleaned from Fanon's own confession is that the oppressed cannot leave the process of restoring their humanity to the oppressive devices of the oppressor. Rather, the oppressed must search within for something that will bring them into contact with their true. humanity.

According to my key informants, the non-violent philosophy of Gandhi and King should be given top priority because it encourages oppressed people to fight social injustice through love. The love, as described in Gandhi and King's non-violent philosophy, is not necessarily an affectionate or sentimental feeling, but rather goodwill and empathy towards the oppressor. This type of love, which Gandhi describes as *ahimsa*, stimulates compassion and humanity for the opponent while

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simultaneously harbouring resistance and passion for social justice. Activism inspired by love separates the oppressor, as a person, from oppression; it sees the oppressor equally as a victim of systems of domination. It also prevents activists from "othering" the oppressor. According to Wineman (2003), the practice of "othering" is rooted in a culture of hatred and practices that deny, disown and split anything within oneself that one, in fact, has in common with other people whom one may not like or agree with. At the heart of Wineman's working theory is the belief that oppression causes "massive personal suffering," which if "left to its own devices," becomes a self-perpetuating impediment to the fight against social injustice (Wineman, 2003, p. 203). Wineman's work, therefore, seeks to understand how the oppressed can "harness" and "contain" their traumatic experiences and transform them into a non-violent counterforce, one that is strong enough to break the cycles of violence and domination. The transformation of *powerless rage* into *constructive rage* is thus, according to Wineman (2003, p. 204), an essential process for individual recovery from trauma and for societal liberation. Thus, to my key informants, one way to avoid the pitfall of destructive rage is to arm oneself with love that moves beyond denial and disassociation with the oppressor. Such love allows the oppressed to see the humanity of the oppressor, and this, according to bell hooks (2000, p. 87), is the pinnacle in the fight against oppression, for without love, one cannot see the human side of the oppressor.

Another way of reading into "loving your opponents" is to see it as an act of self-love. According to Fanon and Memmi, violence dehumanizes both the perpetrator and its victims (Fanon, 1963; Memmi, 1965). This love for the self is not born out of selfishness and personal greed, but a desire not to emulate and mimic the violent behaviours of the oppressor. A non-violent activist is aware that by emulating the violent behaviour of the oppressor, she or he is becoming like the oppressor. This is why non-violent activism does not seek retaliation or any means to destroy one's opponent.

Conclusions

As this essay searches for a non-violent theory that can help pursue social injustice, the goal is not only to search for theoretical clarity, but also a theory that can offer a social and political corrective. In writing this essay, I realized that the scope of my work is not only to produce a discursive reading of Gandhi and King's non-violent philosophy, but also to situate their ideas in ways that can be used for actual social and political intervention in the 21st century. (Re)reading Gandhi and King to understand the power of individual and collective agency recalls the ontological primacy of interpretations. How do we make sense of the world filled with injustice and oppression? What do Gandhi and King truly offer to contemporary victims of social injustice and oppression? How can Gandhi and King's non-violent philosophy assist today's victims of oppression to fight back? These questions are important avenues in considering what social and political strategies would be effective responses to oppression. There are no easy answers to these questions. This is why I sought the opinions and comments of my key informants to gain answers. In talking to my key informants, I noted that Gandhi and King's ideas were solely based on the historico-economic, social and political conditions within their own revolutionary activities. Thus, to theorize them beyond their lived experiences is to conceptually and theoretically (re)imagine how their works can contribute to the contemporary struggles of freeing humanity from social injustice, inequity and oppression.

I have no doubt that my key informants have brought some complex and nuanced readings into the work of Gandhi and King's non-violence philosophy. In spite of this, the essay also acknowledges that the key informants spoke as individuals who admire the works of Gandhi and King; therefore, they read their works with an openness that would have been different if admiration

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was not present. Thus, even with their open-mindedness, the biases of my key informants as they try to make sense of Gandhi and King's non-violent philosophy is undeniable. On a personal level, I am a great admirer of Gandhi and King, and this "personal baggage" undoubtedly shaped the interpretation I brought to the words and comments of my key informants. I caution my readers to treat the findings of this essay as one of the many means of fighting social injustice. Although there are plenty of examples of effective non-violent resistance, there are also examples, such as the case of the Tibetan non-violent movement against Chinese occupation, that demonstrate this course of action does not always yield the desired results.

However, given the original targets of this essay — activists in the fields of education and social work— I maintain that non-violent philosophy can serve great purposes in achieving social justice in these professions. This implies that in a different context — outside education, social work and other related disciplines — the application of ideas in this essay may require some reforms and modification. Each struggle will have to define the kind of strategy that works best.

Notwithstanding this limitation, Gandhi and King's non-violent philosophy has a lot to teach humanity. It teaches victims of oppression to uphold their integrity as they face oppressive structures and domination. Yes, violence may teach the oppressed to fight back, but Gandhi and King insist that the oppressed must fight back on their own terms and conditions. They should not allow the pain and suffering from oppression to define and shape their reactions. Gandhi and King have a humanist vision for society. Their desire is to extend human dignity, freedom, love, care and justice to all those exploited on a daily basis. Their ideas may not address every situation, but they at least teach humanity that there is always an alternative to violent resistance.

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